



The North Carolina Association Of Colored Graduate Nurses: A Proud Heritage

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The Saga of a Journey...and Interludes

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Abstract: In this article the authors discuss the development of the North Carolina Association of Colored Graduate Nurses.

Key Words: North Carolina Association of Colored Graduate Nurses, NCACGN, Organization of NCACGN.

"... The truth is this: The march of Providence is so slow and our desires so impatient; the work of progress is so immense and our means of aiding it so feeble; the life of humanity is so long, that of the individual so brief, that we often see only the ebb of the advancing wave and are thus discouraged. It is history that teaches us to hope." ...Robert E. Lee (Freeman, 1935).

"I solemnly pledge myself before God... I will do all in my power to maintain and elevate the standard of my profession..." (Gretter, 1910)

Despite the recitation of the Florence Nightingale Pledge by nursing graduates for over a century, personal and organizational racism has prevented the Pledge from being fulfilled for many decades. The first fifty years of professional nursing in North Carolina were marred by racial exclusion, prejudice and segregation. From education and unemployment to membership in professional associations, African American nurses in North Carolina, indeed in all the states of the old Confederacy as well as much of the nation, have faced legal, social and professional discrimination.

Yet in the face of these and many other obstacles, African American nurses have survived and thrived. Many of these nurses brought the rudiments of nursing to the poor, uneducated and sick. In addition, they sought to fulfill the obligations of the Florence Nightingale Pledge by elevating the standards of the profession. The North Carolina State Nurses

Association (NCSNA), initially an exclusively white group, provided the primary arena for professional discussion, legislative activity and continuing education programs for nurses in North Carolina. Because of this exclusivity, African American Nurses established a parallel organization, the North Carolina Association of Colored Graduate Nurses (NCACGN). Existing documentary evidence concerning this important, yet all but forgotten, organization reveals dedicated North Carolina nurses working to uphold the promises inherent in the Nightingale Pledge.

When the NCSNA formed in 1902, membership privileges were extended only to white nurses. Although North Carolina was then home to several high caliber nursing schools for African Americans; such as Good Samaritan in Charlotte, St. Agnes in Raleigh and Lincoln in Durham, graduates of these schools were barred from participating in the only professional nursing organization in the state (Wyche, 1938). Membership was also closed to all African American Nurses in the predominant national professional association, the American Nurses Association (ANA), since until 1948 membership was granted only to members of state affiliates.

Seeking the benefits of a professional organization denied them by the ANA, a group of African American nurses, led by Martha Franklin of Philadelphia, met in New York in 1908 to form the National Association of Colored Graduate Nurses (NACGN) (Abrams, 1985). The purposes of the new organization were enumerated in its Certificate of Incorporation. A portion of it reads: "...to promote the professional and educational advancement of nurses in every proper way; to elevate the standards of nursing education; to establish and maintain a code of ethics among nurses..." (Stauper, 1961).

Charlotte Rhone, the only registered nurse from North Carolina to attend the initial meeting of the NACGN, became a charter member of the organization (NACGN Records, 1908-1958). All nurses were welcome to participate in the NACGN. Annual meetings were held to provide opportunities for continuing education, networking and discussion and action on legal, legislative, and professional issues affecting their practice, their race and the nursing profession (Stauper, 1961).

Five North Carolina nurses attended the 1920 NACGN convention in Washington D.C. Carrie Early Broadfoot, of Fayetteville, called the North Carolina nurses together during the conference and suggested that they establish a state chapter of the NACGN. All five agreed to work toward that goal (Wyche, 1938). Upon their return to North Carolina they wrote and spoke to as many nurses as possible about the benefits of having an organization. Their hard work paid off. The first meeting of the North Carolina Colored Graduate Nurses Association (NCCGNA), name later changed to North Carolina Negro Nurses Association (NCNNA) and later still changed to the North Carolina Association of Negro Registered Nurses Incorporated (NCANRI), was held in January 1923 in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Broadfoot was elected president, a post she held for the next eight years. A second meeting was held in Raleigh later that same year with thirty five nurses participating (Wyche, 1938). By 1938, there were 150 active members of the association and by 1949, 269 African American nurses were involved in the organization (NACGN Records, 1908-1958).

The NCCGNA held annual conventions from 1923 through 1949. Formal, informal and social activities at the meetings helped members keep current on clinical and professional issues affecting their practice. Physicians, dentists, public health administrators and national nursing leaders all addressed annual conventions of the NCCGNA. Meeting sites were rotated between cities and towns in central and eastern North Carolina (NACGN Records, 1908-1958).

Due to the lack of primary documents, specific information for each year is currently unavailable. However, newspaper clippings from the national group's scrapbook reveal the 1936 convention of the NCCGNA was held in Winston-Salem; in 1937 the nurses met in Charlotte; Tarboro hosted the 1938 convention; the 1940 and 1947 annual conventions were in Greensboro; and in 1949, the final meeting of the group was held in Raleigh (NACGN Scrapbook, 1908-1958). Hundreds of North Carolina nurses were active members of the NCCGNA. Unfortunately, many of their names are lost to history. However, newspaper clippings and convention documents provide the names of some NCCGNA leaders. A few of the nurses who held office or chaired events for the NCCGNA include: Carrie Early Broadfoot, Ruby Scarlette, Elizabeth McMillan Thompson, Henrietta Forest, Nora Thaxton, Geneva Collins, Queenie Stokes, Ellen Woods Carter, Frances Blanchett, Evelyn Steele, Lucille Zimmerman Williams, Edna Purdie, Rosa Marie Godley, Vizelia Mitchell, Lydia Betts and Gwendolyn Sykes Corney (NACGN Records, 1908-1958).

The organization grew, despite a lack of funds, unpaid staff and an absence of permanent office space. As membership increased, regional subgroups were established. The Eastern Region encompassed the area east of Raleigh; the Central Region included territory from Raleigh in the east through Greensboro in the west. Members of the NCCGNA living from Winston Salem to the Tennessee border composed the Western Region. Each regional group sponsored sessions to inform the members about legal, legislative, and professional concerns and to provide continuing education activities. In addition to the state and regional organizations, the African American nurses in the city of Winston-Salem formed the Edith Cavella Nurses Club. This club named in honor of a nurse who gave her life in World War I, provided further opportunities for professional growth, service and educational opportunities in the city of Winston-Salem (NACGN Records, 1908-1958).

Membership in the NCCGNA offered African American nurses opportunities for professional growth. Members rotated leadership positions, attended and coordinated state and national conferences, lobbied politicians about health and nursing concerns and took turns representing North Carolina on the NACGN Executive Board. In addition, NCCGNA members participated in events sponsored by groups such as the American Red Cross and the Anti-Tubercular Society. Events such as National Negro Health Week also elicited association support (NACGN Records, 1908-1958).

Educational and employment discrimination deeply concerned members of the NCCGNA. In 1937, there were only 11 hospitals in North Carolina employing African American nurses. These hospitals were: Good Samaritan in Charlotte, Lincoln in Durham, Goldsboro State Psychiatric Hospital in Goldsboro, Richardson Memorial in Greensboro, Jubilee in Henderson, Cheatham in Oxford, St. Agnes in Raleigh, Community in Wilmington, McCauley in Raleigh, Mercy in Wilson and State Sanatorium in Sanatorium (Massey, 1937). In addition, by 1937, African American nurses seeking employment in community health could only find jobs in Asheville, Charlotte, Greensboro, Raleigh, Weldon, Wilmington and Winston-Salem. At that same time there were only four schools of nursing in North Carolina open to African American students, these included: Good Samaritan in Charlotte, Lincoln in Durham, Richardson Memorial in Greensboro and Community in Wilmington (Massey, 1937).

Nationally, by the 1940's a zeitgeist of social, political, moral and economic forces were changing the accepted patterns of behavior regarding race. Racial injustice was being questioned by more people than ever before in American history. The drawbacks of maintaining a two-tiered society were increasingly unacceptable. Organized nursing was in the forefront of breaking down racial barriers in North Carolina.

Leaders of the NCCGNA and the NCSNA met throughout the 1940's to create a plan to merge, thus ending discrimination in the largest professional nursing organization. This planning paid off. In 1949, the NCCGNA voted itself out of existence and the NCSNA voted to open its membership to all registered nurses in the state of North Carolina (NACGN Records, 1908-1958). Marie B. Noell, executive secretary of the NCSNA praised the actions of the NACGN by saying "Since all citizens of North Carolina need adequate nursing care and since the professional nursing organizations are to a great degree responsible for such care, I believe the action taken this morning by the North Carolina Association of Negro Registered Nurses, Inc., to dissolve its organization of 27 years standing and to associate itself wholly with the North Carolina Nurses Association will be a great asset in promoting nursing service for all North Carolinians" (NACGN Records, 1908-1958).

Elizabeth M. Thompson, president of NCCGNA in 1949 closed the last meeting of the NCCGNA with these words "The final chapter has been written by the North Carolina Association of Negro Registered Nurses Inc., but the activities of nurses and nursing must go on. As professional women we all have a great part to play in furthering the progress and elevating the standards of this work. The integrating of the associations gives opportunity for great service and by so doing humanity will be better served" (NACGN Records, 1908-1958).

It took over a decade after the merger of the professional organizations for white schools of nursing in North Carolina to accept African American students. Additionally, the

passage of the Federal Civil Rights Act of 1964 was the catalyst to end employment discrimination against African American nurses in North Carolina (Clark-Hines, 1989).

Most North Carolina nurses, regardless of race, are unaware of the hard work and professionalism exhibited by a small group of Tarheel African American nurses in the first half of this century. These individuals worked under very difficult circumstances to promote professional nursing. Their determination to elevate the standards of nursing for themselves and their patients continue to inspire us today.

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